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THE OPERATION OF THE 505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY  
REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM (82D AIRBORNE DIVISION)  
IN THE AIRBORNE LANDINGS ON SICILY  
9-11 July 1943 (SICILIAN CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of Assistant Regimental Adjutant)

Type of operation described: PARACHUTE REGIMENTAL  
COMBAT TEAM IN THE ATTACK OF AN ENEMY HELD ISLAND.

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THE OPERATION OF THE 505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY  
REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM (82D AIRBORNE DIVISION)  
IN THE AIRBORNE LANDINGS ON SICILY, 9-11 JULY 1943  
(SICILIAN CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of Assistant Regimental Adjutant)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph describes the airborne attack and initial ground operations of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team, 82d U.S. Airborne Division, in the invasion of the island of Sicily during the period 9 to 11 July 1943.

First, it is necessary to briefly discuss the principal military and diplomatic events which led up to the air and sea invasion of this island fortress.

January 1943 found a once proud German Africa Corps rapidly withdrawing west across Tripolitania ahead of the British Eighth Army, who in the previous three months had advanced some 1400 miles. (1) To the west, in Algeria, strong ~~U.S.~~ <sup>British</sup> Forces of the First ~~U.S.~~ Army were driving German and Italian troops east toward Tunisia. It was apparent that within a few months the Axis troops in Africa would be defeated.

Further strategic plans were necessary, and as a result, President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met with their staffs in North Africa for the Casablanca Conference. Here, among the decisions that were made, it was planned to end the Tunisian Campaign as quickly as possible and then invade Sicily. (2) (See Map A for location of Sicily)

The strategic purposes for invading and conquering Sicily were:

1. To secure bases closer to the Italian mainland for its eventual invasion.

(1) A-6, P.44. (2) A-1, p.185.

2. To divert Axis military strength from the Russian front.

3. To clear the Allied line of communication through the Mediterranean which would again open the British life-line to India. (3)

On 6 May the Allied Forces launched a strong attack and both Tunis and Bizerta fell. (4) The last of the Axis armies in Africa were defeated and now the Sicilian Operation was the next step on the road to victory in Europe.

#### OBJECTIVE - SICILY

Sicily, an important stepping stone on the way to Europe's Fortress, was the objective for invasion and conquest. It had been conquered in its history by many people, among them the Carthaginians, Goths, Saracens, and Normans. (5)

In order to understand more about the objective, let us consider the physical make-up of both the island itself and the enemy that occupied it.

Sicily is the largest, most fertile, and most populous island in the Mediterranean. (6) It has an area of 25,709 kilometers, or approximately the same size as the State of Vermont. Its coast line measures 485 miles, and it has a population of approximately 4,000,000. (7) Sicily has a narrow coastal plain but behind it the mountains rise quickly. (8) The principal landmark in all of Sicily is Mount Etna, which rises from a base of four hundred square miles to a height of 10,740 feet. The roads are divided into three types: State, which are wide, first class roads; Provincial, which are second class roads and often too narrow to carry anything but one way traffic; and Communal, which are narrow winding dirt roads and unsuitable for military traffic. There

(3) A-3, p.22. (4) A-6, p.76. (5) A-12, p. 779. (6) A-12, p.778.  
(7) A-13, p.1. (8) A-6, p.93.

are no large rivers which would be military obstacles. The climate is mild the year around except in the mountains. (9)

It was known by early June that all the enemy troops on the island were controlled by the Italian Sixth Army, with headquarters located at Enna. The Army consisted of two corps, the 15th and 16th, and they in turn were made up of 5 Italian Coastal Divisions, 4 Italian Infantry Divisions, 2 German Armored Divisions, and many small air force, anti-airborne, anti-aircraft, and headquarters units. Enemy strength was estimated at some 200,000 troops. (10) (See Map B)

Reports indicated that the enemy had approximately 500 German and 250 Italian combat aircraft in Sicily, operating from 12 first class airdromes, and 23 landing fields that would accommodate fighters. (11)

The coast defenses, although continuous, did not appear strong. They consisted mainly of barbed wire entanglements covered by fire from machine gun and pillbox emplacements. (12)

#### THE ALLIED PLAN OF INVASION

The new command, established as a result of the Casablanca Conference, with General Eisenhower of the United States as supreme commander and General Sir Harold Alexander of Britain his deputy, began planning the Sicilian invasion in February 1943.

This Allied plan of attack called for an assault of the southeastern position of Sicily with the British Eighth Army on the right and the American Seventh Army on the left.

The British Eighth Army, Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery commanding, was to land between Pozzallo and Syracuse, capture the airfields in the Plain of Catania, advance up the east coast, capturing Syracuse in conjunction with British Air-

(9) A-3, p.1,3,8,11. (10) A-5, p.7. (11) A-15, p.2.  
(12) A-6, p.93.

borne Troops that were to drop there, and continue advancing north to Catania. (13)

The American Seventh Army, General George S. Patton commanding, was to make amphibious assault landings at Licata, Gela, and Scoglitti by the American 3d, 1st, and 45th Infantry Divisions, respectively; then to drive inland to "Line Yellow" in order to stop any enemy interference from the northwest. In addition to these amphibious assault landings, the American plan called for the night dropping of one parachute infantry combat team between Caltagirone, where strong enemy forces were known to be located, and the landing beaches at Gela. (14) (See Map B) For this invasion the 1st and 45th Infantry Divisions formed the American II Corps, under command of Major General (now General) Omar N. Bradley. (15)

American reserves consisted of one floating reserve force and the 9th Infantry and 82d Airborne Divisions, less one airborne combat team, standing by in Africa. (16)

The British Navy would support the Allied invasion and make two naval diversions: one toward the west coast of Sicily, and the other across the Ionian Sea toward the western shores of Greece.

Both American and British aircraft would support the invasion forces. Because of Allied bombing missions and the continuous destruction of enemy fighter opposition, a great part of the enemy's air power was neutralized. (17)

#### GENERAL SITUATION OF THE 82D AIRBORNE DIVISION

The 82d Airborne Division had landed at Casablanca, North Africa, on 10 May 1943, direct from the United States. It moved overland, shortly after its arrival, to Oujda, French Morocco,

(13) A-6, p.92. (14) A-8, p.26. (15) A-9, p.1. (16) A-5, Chart 2. (17) A-5, p.7.



where a rigorous training program was put into effect. (See Map A) Although it was not known at this time when or where the Division would be committed, it was a certainty that a physically strong, well trained team would be needed. (18)

Finally the information came. The Division commander, Major General Mathew B. Ridgeway (now Lt General) called a meeting of his unit commanders in mid-May, and announced that the 505th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team had been assigned the missions of:

1. "Landing the maximum parachute elements that can be lifted in available troop carrier aircraft on the night of D-1, D-day on drop zones on the high ground east of Ponte Olivio.

2. "Assisting the 1st Infantry Division in landing, and the capture of the airfield at Ponte Olivio." (19)

3. Disrupting enemy communications and movement of reserves.

He also announced that this parachute task force, under command of Colonel James M. Gavin (now Major General), would be composed of: 505th Parachute Infantry; 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry; 456th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion; Company "B", 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion; Detachment, 82d Airborne Signal Company; Detachment, 307th Airborne Medical Company; Air Support Party; P.W.I. Personnel. (20)

The remainder of the Division was given the mission of: "concentrating rapidly, by successive air lifts, in Sicily, by D plus 7, in either the 45th or 3d Infantry Division Areas as directed." (21)

This was the first time in military history that an airborne unit of this size had been given such a mission. The largest night drop previous to this was the dropping from 12 aircraft of

(18) Personal knowledge. (19) A-10, p.d-7. (20) A-10, p.d-9.

(21) A-10, p.d-7.

one airborne company on a German radio-location station in France, on 27 February 1943. (22)

Although it was not disclosed to the troops where they would drop, a mission had been assigned, and with it many projects got underway. The training program was increased to a 14-hour day. War rooms with their photo coverage and sand tables of the drop areas were in constant use. All weapons were fired and zeroed. The enemy's weapons and their operations were studied. Rapid assembly of troops after a jump, particularly at night, appeared to be one of the major problems to overcome, therefore many such problems were run by all units, large and small. Joint training with the Air Force Troop Carrier units, which were going to fly the troops to their destination, was conducted. Each parachutist was issued his basic load of combat equipment, and this, as well as the individual plane loads, was checked and rechecked. A true scale replica of the objective area was constructed, and small units, battalion combat teams, and the Regimental combat team ran through their part of the mission, firing live ammunition. (23)

By the 1st of July, when the Division moved by air from Oujda, French Morocco, to dispersal airdromes near Kairouan, Tunisia, (See Map A) every man in the 505th Combat Team knew his part of the mission and had the utmost confidence in himself, his weapons, and his team.

At Kairouan the battalion combat teams were bivouacked in the olive groves nearest their respective take-off airdromes. Because the enemy was less than 200 miles away, strict blackout, dispersal, and camouflage discipline was enforced. Only light training was conducted with much time spent on last minute administrative and supply details. New sand tables and better photo (22) A-7, p.56. (23) Personal knowledge.

coverage were displayed in the war rooms, but still only the battalion commanders and their staffs, and the combat team commander and his staff, knew where the objective was located. Last minute coordination was effected with the 1st Infantry Division by the exchange of key personnel for tactical briefings. This served a double purpose for the airborne troops, as they were wearing a different uniform from the other Americans, and the familiarization with the parachutist's jumpsuit was necessary to prevent any mistaken identity and consequent exchange of fire when the ground link-up was made. (24)

#### THE AIR FORCE PLAN

The Air Force plan was to fly the 505th Combat Team in C-47 type aircraft from ten departure airdromes in the Kairouan, Tunisia Area, east of the island of Malta, north to the Sicilian coastline, west to the Lago Di Bivarre, and then inland to the unit drop zones. (See Maps A and C) The return flight was from Sicily to the island of Pantelleria and from there to home bases. The formation was to be a V of V's\*. As it took nine planes per parachute rifle company, this formation fitted the airborne plan very well. (25)

Fighter cover would protect the take-off and rendezvous areas. Night fighters would escort the air column to and from the target area. Bomber and attack aircraft would neutralize antiaircraft and searchlight positions in the approach corridors to the selected drop zones. This air protection would not only reduce casualties to the air forces, but also to the airborne personnel. (26)

All pilots were instructed that all combat loads would be dropped in enemy territory and that every effort would be made to drop parachutists accurately on the drop zones. (27)

\*Three planes in a small V and three of the small V's making a nine-plane V of one flight.

(24) Personal knowledge. (25) A-15, p.1. (26) A-18, p.1. (27) A-15, p.1.

Time of flight from rendezvous to drop areas was approximately three hours. The parachutists would be dropped at an air speed of 110 miles per hour from an altitude of 600 feet, on receiving the green light signal from their respective pilot. (28)

#### 505TH REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM'S PLAN OF ATTACK

The 505th Regimental Combat Team's plan of attack was to drop by parachute the complete force, except a demolition section, in the vicinity of an important road junction called "Y". This junction was located approximately seven miles northeast of Gela and controlled all traffic on the Gela-Caltagirone and Gela-Vittoria roads. Regimental headquarters, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 505th, Battalion headquarters and Batteries A and B 456th Field Artillery Battalion, would drop north of road-junction "Y" on DZ "S", attack, and overcome the strong point, thus denying to the enemy the use of the best roads leading to the landing beaches of the 1st Infantry Division. The 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry would drop south of the Niscemi crossroads called "X" on DZ "Q", establish and defend roadblocks on the road from Niscemi south toward "Y" junction and the beaches. The 3d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry and Battery C, 456th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, would drop south of road-junction "Y" on DZ "T", occupy and defend the high ground overlooking the enemy at "Y", and also send patrols south and then west to contact the 1st Infantry Division. The 2nd Battalion Demolition Section, with infantry support, would drop about five miles to the east of the main body on DZ "X", prepare the road and railroad bridges over the Acate River for demolition and, if attacked in force, destroy these bridges. (29)(See Map C)

Moonlight would greatly aid in the assembling of troops, and

(28) Personal knowledge. (29) A-17.

on the target date there was a full moon until early in the morning. It was part of the combat team's plan of attack to make the drops shortly before the moon set, in order to take advantage of the moonlight for reorganization, and then take advantage of the darkness to establish the defenses and attack the enemy. (30)

The air support parties, which would jump with the combat team, would render close support.

Communication upon landing would be established by radio. Two regimental command nets would be placed in immediate operation, one using SCR 288's and the other using SCR 511's. Wire would be laid as soon as possible after organization of the drop zones.

Ammunition, other than the basic load, would be placed in battalion combat team dumps.

Medical evacuation would be from battalion aid stations direct to shore medical stations when the link-up with seaborne forces was effected.

Individual clothing and food would be carried by each parachutist. The food consisted of one "K" and one "D" ration, and one canteen of water. (31)

Re-supply by air, if needed, would be available in accordance with regimental re-supply plan. This called for one "K" ration, one quart of water per individual, and additional ammunition. Total weight of one lift was 35.6 tons carried in 29 C-47 type aircraft. (32)

Each parachutist was equipped to carry out the Combat Team's plan of attack. The load of the individual rifleman consisted of an M-1 rifle, with one hundred sixty-eight rounds of ammunition, (30) A-9, p.4. (31) A-17. (32) A-18.

four hand grenades, one antitank mine, a bayonet, an assault knife, one "K" ration, one "D" ration, a canteen of water, an entrenching tool, a gas mask, a regular first aid pouch plus a parachutist's first aid kit, which contained morphine, a jump rope, blanket, underwear, socks, toilet articles, helmet, web equipment, and an escape kit. (33)

#### FINAL PREPARATION

On 9 July 1943 the high command, seeing that the weather was reported favorable, the invasion fleet was in position, and that all other pre-invasion plans were ready, made the announcement to participating troops that 10 July was D-day.

On the morning of 9 July the equipment bundles, which contained the crew served weapons and ammunition of the airborne troopers, were rolled and placed in the para-racks on the bottom of the planes. Each bundle was drop tested to insure that its release mechanism would work. Last minute show-down inspections insured that every man had all his equipment. Clothing and equipment that was remaining behind was placed in rear echelon supply dumps and put under guard. Final briefings were held to reassure each man of his part in the overall plan. Invasion arm bands, which bore the American Flag, were issued to be worn by all personnel on their right arm, and strips of white cloth which were to be worn on the left arm for night identification purposes were also issued. Individual parachutes were issued and left in the planes for use that night.

Pilot-Jumpmaster conferences were held later in the day, at which time the complete air force and airborne plans for the drop were discussed. It was important that all airborne personnel knew the type of formation to be flown, checkpoints, air support, (33) Personal knowledge.

and air force instructions concerning the actual drop. It was at these conferences that all questions were answered and the air force-airborne team understood their mutual mission. It was at these conferences, also, that the airborne troop leaders found out that the objective area, which they knew so well, was located in Sicily.

During the afternoon the men dressed for combat. And after the evening meal company commanders gave final briefings, issued last minute instructions, and, after reviewing the correct procedure, issued the invasion countersign and parole:

QUESTION: George.

ANSWER: Marshall.

The troops traveled from their marshaling areas to their individual airplanes and after last minute Jumpmaster-Pilot conferences and instructions from the planes' crew chiefs on the use of life rafts and life preservers, in case they went down in the Mediterranean, the troops awaited take-off. (34)

#### THE AIRBORNE INVASION OF SICILY

At 1930 hours on 9 July 1943 the first of the combat team's two hundred and twenty-six airplanes, loaded with 3,405 parachutists and their equipment, began taking off from departure air-dromes in the Kairouan area. The planes were soon in formation and at the prescribed time the lead ships of the thirty-six-minute long air column crossed the Tunisian coastline on the way to Sicily. (35)

For tactical reasons the formations were flying extremely low over the choppy waters of the Mediterranean, and there was no interplane communication. A thirty-five-mile-an-hour wind from the west broke up the plane formations and blew planes off their course. As a result pilots lost their direction and the check

(34) (35) Personal knowledge.

points were not seen. (36) Many planes were alone without full navigational equipment, and even those who were able to stay in some sort of formation, having missed their principal check and turning point at Malta, found that limited air force navigation was not sufficient to bring them to the planned drop areas.

Because the formations had been badly broken up, planes approached Sicily from many directions. Some almost passed over elements of the seaborne forces, which were lying off shore awaiting their H-hour, and tense moments followed, for the air column had been routed to avoid them, and if the planes flew within their certain sectors they would draw fire. Many planes, because they had been blown east of the planned flight course, first sighted Sicily on their left instead of on the right, as had been planned, and circled back out to sea to attempt an approach in the scheduled area. (37)

These circumstances, coupled with the fact that planned drop zones in some cases were hidden by the haze and dust of pre-invasion bombing, and many planes came under heavy anti-aircraft fire once over the island, resulted in the dropping of parachutists and equipment from Gela, in the center of the American sector, to Avola in the British east coast sector - some sixty miles away. (38) (See Map D)

The first the United States knew of the Sicilian Invasion was when President Roosevelt, who was host at a dinner in the White House honoring General Henri-Honore Giraud, commander of the French Forces in North Africa, made the brief and dramatic announcement: "I have just had word of the first attack against the soft underbelly of Europe." This took place on 9 July 1943, (United States time) soon after the invasion got underway. (39)

(36) A-16, p.7,8. (37) A-9, p.13, 9, 6. (38) A-16, p.28.

(39) A-2, p.667.



Despite the fact that the 505th Combat Team was so badly scattered that the original plans could not materialize, each trooper knew the missions that had to be performed, and when they realized they were not on their correct drop areas, guerrilla bands rather than an organized combat team immediately went into action, disrupting communications, destroying the enemy, halting enemy movement toward the landing beaches, and fighting their way toward their original objectives.

The individual encounters and accomplishments of many guerrilla bands, that because of the location of their drop were unable to join larger forces, will never be recorded, for they are known only to the men who were there.

This monograph will now describe the ground operations on 10 and 11 July of some of the guerrilla bands as well as the principal fighting forces of the 505th Parachute Infantry Combat Team which assembled and conducted operations.

It should be noted that although this Combat Team's pre-invasion training prepared them primarily for an initial defensive operation, they had been schooled in all subjects to such an extent that they successfully conducted one-way and two-way attacks, counterattacks, attacks with and against armor, attacks against and defenses of fortified positions, attacks on towns and street fighting, and defenses against a numerically superior enemy and armor. (40)

#### 3D BATTALION SERIAL, 504TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY

The 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry, whose mission was to drop on DZ "Q" south of Niscemi and keep enemy forces from moving south from "X" toward "Y" junction, found itself scattered from a point 5 miles southwest of Niscemi to Pachino, 4 miles (40) Personal knowledge.

inland from the southeast corner of Sicily, a distance of some 60 miles.(41) The principal fighting forces in the objective area consisted of two groups of approximately 60 parachutists each, under command of Lt George J. Watts and Lt Willis J. Ferrell. (See Map E)

Lt Ferrell landed south of Niscemi and assembled his group throughout the night. Realizing he was not on his scheduled drop zone, he moved to the critical terrain feature, a high hill which overlooked the Niscemi-Gela road, and there, around a large chateau, established an all around defense. From this position he organized combat patrols which made sorties on enemy communications, and troops, in the area, and on several occasions throughout D-day the enemy attempted to dislodge them, but were repulsed on each occasion, and were forced to by-pass the chateau on the way south.

Lt Watts landed about two and one-half miles southeast of Niscemi, and after assembling his group, moved north and west toward the objective area. A German motorized patrol was encountered by this force shortly after daybreak on the Niscemi-Biscari highway. The troopers, having seen the enemy coming, moved to the sides of the road and, on signal of Lt Watts, at the time the enemy was in the trap, brought a devastating cross-fire down that destroyed the German vehicles and men. Progress towards Niscemi was slow, as enemy communications and an Italian patrol were also destroyed enroute. (See Map E)

About 0900 hours on D-plus-1, Lt Watts was able to contact Lt Ferrell by radio and both forces were consolidated in what was later to be known as "Ferrell's Forces", at the chateau defensive area overlooking the Niscemi-Gela highway.

(41) A-21.

Shortly before noon on D-plus-1 the observation post in the chateau reported that a column of Germans, estimated at a battalion, was coming up the road from the south. Lt Ferrell, realizing that the enemy was retreating, gave the order to concentrate all fire power on the highway side of the chateau and hold fire. As if by a stroke of luck the German column, not realizing that "Ferrell's Forces" were in the chateau area and looking right down on them, suddenly halted for a ten-minute break directly opposite the American strong point. Tense moments followed, but as the Germans started to get up and put on their packs the silence was broken by a rain of fire which killed many Germans and threw their column into a turmoil. The battle which followed lasted all afternoon, with Ferrell's Forces, armed with both American and captured weapons\*, repulsing counterattack after counterattack. There was one break in the battle when a German lieutenant, bearing a white flag, came up the hill to arrange a surrender, but when he saw that he was fighting American parachutists he refused to surrender and returned to his position. The Germans withdrew at dusk, leaving over fifty dead.

"Ferrell's Forces" held their position until relieved by other elements of the 505th Combat Team and the 16th Infantry, 1st U.S. Division on D-plus-3.(42)

Three planes dropped men from the 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry, approximately 4 miles northwest of Biscari, and Lt Peter J Eaton, 3d Battalion Motor Platoon Leader, took charge of the group. On the morning of D-day, having assembled

\*All personnel of the Combat Team had received training in the firing of enemy weapons in Africa.

all the men in the immediate area and also the equipment, to include 81-mm mortars and ammunition, this band of troopers proceeded west toward Niscemi. At 1200 hours, D-day, scouts encountered two Italian trucks towing 47-mm anti-tank guns, and the force quickly ambushed the enemy and captured the guns. Having no contact with other members of the Combat Team, Lt Eaton decided to establish a roadblock on the Biscari-Niscemi road, utilizing the anti-tank guns as well as his own fire power. Later that afternoon a column of Italian motorized infantry, estimated to be a battalion, moved from Niscemi into the roadblock. The captured 47-mm anti-tank guns knocked out an eleven-ton Italian tankette which led the column, and other troopers, firing small arms and 81-mm mortar fire, hit the column with such surprise that the enemy was forced to withdraw, leaving dead and wounded. Lt Eaton realized that his group of some 50 men couldn't hold up such a sizable enemy force for very long once they had reorganized for a counterattack, so he destroyed the enemy equipment and withdrew to the south where he joined the 180th Infantry of the 45th U.S. Division on D-plus-1. (43)(See Map E)

Major William R. Beall, executive officer of 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry, dropped with three plane loads near Pachino, 60 miles from the objective area. His group joined forces from the 1st Canadian Division and aided in the reduction of an Italian garrison. After two days of fighting with the Canadians, they were sent by RAF crash boat along the coast to Scoglitti and returned to American control. (44)

(43) A-22, p.8. (44) A-22, p.8.

### 1ST BATTALION SERIAL, 505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY

The 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry, whose mission was to drop on Drop Zone "S" and overcome the strong point at road-junction "Y", found itself scattered from Gela to Noto, on the east coast, a distance of some 50 miles. The bulk of the battalion, some twenty-three plane loads, were dropped east of Noto in the British Sector, and after assembling and reorganizing they captured and held this town. (Shown on Map D) Contact was made with the British forces, and this group fought for several days with the British Eighth Army before being evacuated to American control.

The principal fighting force in the objective area consisted of the battalion command group, company headquarters, and two platoons of Company "A", who dropped four miles south of Niscemi, about two and one-half miles from their drop zone. (See Map E) The nine planes that dropped this group were under intense machine gun fire from road-junction "Y" and supporting strong points at the time of drop, and some men were dead when they hit the ground. The enemy, from a farmhouse which had been converted into a pillbox-type strong point with supporting pillboxes around it, continued to rake the drop area with machine gun fire after the parachutists had landed.

Captain Edwin M Sayre (now Major), commanding Company "A", led a twelve-man attack on the machine gun emplacements, and finding heavy concrete pillboxes instead of guns dug in, withdrew to organize a more substantial attack. With company headquarters and the 1st platoon acting as a base of fire, Captain Sayre led the 2d platoon in an enveloping movement and assault, which resulted in taking one pillbox. Seeing a pillbox captured, the enemy withdrew to the farmhouse. The machine guns of the

pillbox were turned on the enemy troops, who were firing from the farmhouse, thus covering another assault led by the company commander, which ended in the complete surrender of the 40 Italians and 10 Germans in the garrison. Immediately, a defense was established, for the prisoners stated that a combat team of the Herman Goering Panzer Division was less than two miles away. The battalion commander, Lt Colonel Arthur Gorham, arrived at this time with about 30 additional troopers and completed the defense plans.

At 0700 hours on D-day the enemy struck, and although the initial fire of defending troopers caused many enemy casualties, Colonel Gorham could see he was against a numerically superior enemy that was supported by tanks. Their counterattack would mean many American casualties in defense of a strong point that was not the objective, so he had the troops and their prisoners withdraw to their planned drop zone.

From DZ "S" he sent one of their prisoners to the pillboxes at road-junction "Y" to inform the enemy that the heavy naval fire, which was falling about 200 yards in front of their position at the time, was controlled by the parachutists and would be placed on them if they didn't surrender. The enemy, believing this to be the truth, completely surrendered, and Company "A" was able to occupy the pillboxes without a fight. This surrender was effected at 1045 hours on D-day, and the Regimental Objective, of seizing strong point "Y" and the high ground northwest of it, was thus accomplished. (See Map E)

Enemy tanks hit strong point "Y" from the north shortly after its surrender. Troopers, who were expecting the enemy, were waiting in the pillboxes behind the Italian guns, and after receiving heavy fire, the tanks withdrew.

At 1130 hours, scouts of the 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry, 1st U.S. Division, arrived at road-junction "Y" and found, as they had been told prior to the invasion, this was held by U.S. parachutists. They didn't realize until later, however, that if they had been one hour earlier the enemy would have caused them a lot of trouble.

Colonel Gorham's group was attached to a battalion of the 16th Infantry, and on D-plus-1, north of "Y", fought all day against an enemy infantry battalion reinforced by Mark IV and Mark VI tanks. The objective of the tanks was to break through the American lines and take the covered route of approach through "Y" to the 1st Division beaches. The tanks drove up to, and at one time into, the American lines, but the desperate fighting of the troops kept them from breaking through and forced them to cross an open area further to the west. (See Map E) American naval gunfire was directed on them once they were in the open, and when the smoke lifted, over fifteen enemy tanks had been knocked out and the others forced to withdraw.

This unit continued to fight with the 16th Infantry until relieved on D-plus-3. (45)

#### 2D BATTALION SERIAL, 505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY

The 2d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry, whose mission was to drop on Drop Zone "S" in regimental reserve, was dropped along with twenty-three of the forty-five planeloads of the 456th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, almost intact in an area south of Comiso, approximately 25 miles from its scheduled objective. (See Map E) Because this area was close to the coast, it was a well organized defensive area, and at the time of the jump

(45) A-22; A-9, p.7,8,14; A-16, p.10,11. Personal knowledge. Statement of Captain Edwin M Sayre, then commander of Company A, 505th Parachute Infantry, 1 November 1948.

the entire batalion was receiving heavy machine gun and small arms fire. Many men were hit and others killed before they landed. Some men landed on or near pillboxes and were engaged in fierce fighting immediately.

Major Mark Alexander, the Battalion Commander, soon realized that he was not in his objective area, and started immediate assembly and reorganization in order to have a force of infantry and artillery with which to hit the enemy. Despite the fact that there was much enemy firing in the drop area, the battalion was assembled by daylight and moved west toward S.Croce Camerina.

The enemy force which held this town consisted of well trained Italian troops, and "E" Company, acting as the advance guard, came under heavy fire as they approached the outskirts of town. The company commenced an organized attack, and as the mortars and artillery went into position to render support, the leading platoon deployed and established a base of fire. The balance of the company moved south under cover of the stone walls and a stream bed, and assaulted the town from the flank. After some short but hard fought street fighting, the company captured the town and 144 Italian soldiers. Among the captured equipment were machine guns and over 10,000 rounds of ammunition for them, over 500 rifles and carbines with ammunition, and many cases of hand grenades.

Holding the town as a base of operations, Major Alexander sent company size forces to the south and to the north, engaging and capturing enemy pillbox emplacements which were located at most of the road junctions. By the end of D-day, the 2d Battalion had the area in front of the 45th U.S. Division completely under control.

D-plus-1 was spent in completing their reorganization, and



that night contact was made with the Combat Team headquarters, who directed they move to the vicinity of Biazzo Ridge. The battalion marched north through Vittoria, then to the west on the Gela Road where the link-up was made on the morning of D-plus-2. (46)

### 3d BATTALION SERIAL, 505TH PARACHUTE INFANTRY

The 3d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry, whose mission was to drop on Drop Zone "T", capture the high ground south of strong point "Y", and send patrols south and west to contact the 1st U.S. Division, found itself divided into three fighting forces.

The first of these forces consisted of eight of the nine planeloads of "I" Company who had dropped exactly on their assigned drop zone. This was the only group of the Combat Team's 226 planeloads to do this. Part of the Company set up defensive positions on the high ground south of strong point "Y", while two platoons went on their special missions; one to the west end of Lago di Bivarré where beacon fires to guide the 16th Infantry on their landings were lit, and the other to a railroad cut where the walls were prepared for demolitions. In carrying out these tasks the Company's missions were accomplished without mishap. Being unable to contact the main body of the Combat Team, the Company remained in its defensive position on the objective until the Combat Team's reorganization on D-plus-4. (See Map E)

The second fighting force was "G" Company, who landed almost intact near the highway crossing over the Acate River. After Captain James McGinity, the company commander, assembled his men, he realized he was not on the assigned drop area, and so he decided to seize this highway bridge. Shortly before dawn on D-day

(46) A-22; A-16, p.23; A-9, p.15.

he attacked and destroyed the Italian force guarding the river-crossing and established a road block. Despite enemy attacks to seize this valuable crossing it was held until D-plus-2, when the Combat Team commander's force used it on the way to Gela. (See Map E)

The third fighting force consisted of the remainder of the battalion serial, which was scattered over an area southeast of the Acate River inland from the town of Scoglitti. (47)

A group of this third fighting force, which consisted of some 60 troopers and 3 sections of "C" Battery, 456th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, assembled after the drop and moved east. (See Map E) They were the first troops into the city of Vittoria. During the initial attack on a small Italian garrison within the city, Lt (now Major) William J Harris, 3d Battalion S-3, was captured. During his capture, Lt Harris, through the medium of broken Italian and English, convinced the defenders that a strong force of American troops was advancing on the city, and that surrender was their only escape. As a result, the Italian commander raised the white flag and surrendered his garrison and command. (48)

The balance of the third force, after encountering and subduing small enemy forces, assembled under the battalion commander, Major (now Lt Col) Edward C Krause. The reorganization of this group continued throughout D-day, and that night they went into bivouac near the Gela-Vittoria highway. On D-plus-1 they participated in the battle for Biazzo Ridge.\*(49)(See Map E)

\*This action is described on page 28 of this monograph.

(47) A-9, p.14; A-16, p.23, 31. (48) Personal knowledge. Statement of Major William J. Harris (then Lt) on 5 Nov 48. (49) A-16, p.23.

THE HEADQUARTERS AND COMMAND SERIAL, 505TH COMBAT TEAM

The Headquarters and Command Serial, which was to drop on Drop Zone "S" north of road-junction "Y", was dropped (less the demolition section) over an area from 20 to 30 miles south-east of their objective, between Vittoria and S.Croce Camerina. Because this group was so badly spread over an inland area which contained few military objectives, there were no principal fighting forces organized in the drop area. Individual guerrilla bands, seeing no familiar landmarks, worked their way cross-country searching out the enemy and disrupting communication lines. Some moved south toward the firing that could be heard in the beach area and linked up with the 2d Battalion forces, but the main body of the serial moved in small bands toward the west. (50)

The three planes carrying the Regimental Demolitions Section dropped their load of men near Avola on the eastern coast of the island. (Shown on Map D) They organized a defensive area and held it until relieved by the British. On D-plus-10 this group was evacuated by the British to the Combat Team's base camp in Tunisia. (51)

A group of approximately 40 troopers, under command of Lt H.H.Swingle, the Headquarters Company commander, had assembled on the high ground overlooking the S.Croce Camerina-Vittoria road by daybreak on the morning of D-day. (See Map E) From their position they could see a cross-road defended by four enemy pill-boxes, one on each corner, which were pinning down another group of troopers with their machine gun fire. After watching the mutual firing of these emplacements it was seen that a stone wall, (50) A-16, p.22, 30; Personal knowledge. (51) A-16, p.31.

which ran to the rear of one of them, couldn't be covered by their fire. Lt Swinger's plan of attack was to draw the enemy fire from the group which was pinned down by having 25 men open fire from positions at the base of the hill, in the meantime he would lead the balance of the group along the stone wall, capture one pillbox, and, by using its weapons and cover, capture the others. This plan was executed on a strict time schedule, and within two hours the pillboxes were taken. Soon after their capture these emplacements were being used against enemy troops attempting to retire inland from the beaches which the 45th U.S.Division had assaulted. (52)

Throughout the remainder of D-day and the early morning of D-plus-1, groups of men from the Headquarters Serial, who had worked their way west from their drop locations, assembled at the crossroad. When word was received on D-plus-1 that a part of the Combat Team was having a tough battle on Biazze Ridge, a group of 45th Division trucks, which were carrying prisoners from the Vittoria Area to the beaches, were taken over and the group moved through Vittoria to the Ridge.(53)

The Combat Team commander, Colonel James M. Gavin, who had jumped from the lead plane of the Headquarters Serial, assembled a small group of men, including his S-1 and S-3, and moved west from their drop area. This group, like the others, found itself engaged in a fire fight with the enemy before it had traveled too far, and, after a short but hard fight, knocked out the opposition. At approximately 0240 hours on D-plus-1 the group contacted elements of the 45th U.S.Division, and their exact location was determined. From here they moved to Vittoria, picking up members of the Combat Team as they went.

(52) Personal knowledge. Statement of Capt H H Swinger in April 1944. (53) Eye-witness account.

At 0600 hours on D-plus-1, the group proceeded west on the Gela road toward the original objective. They soon contacted the 3d Battalion force under Major Krause, which was in bivouac just off this highway, and having told them to move west as soon as they could get in a march formation, Colonel Gavin and his group continued.

At a point approximately one mile east of Biazzo Ridge, the group contacted some men from the 45th U.S. Division and a group of 20 parachutists, many of whom were from "B" Company, 307th Engineer Battalion. Colonel Gavin was informed that an enemy force held the road ahead of him and that he couldn't get through. This information, coupled with information received from a German officer who had lost his way and drove up to the group asking directions, but instead was captured, gave the Colonel the following enemy situation: that a large German force from the Herman Goering Panzer Division was moving from Biscarri to Vittoria; they were established along the Biazzo Ridge line astride the highway; they were being slowed down in their advance by elements of the 45th Division and groups of parachutists who were in contact with them. After a point reconnaissance, it was decided to attack west to the Acate River line with the Combat Team commander's group plus the 20 men from the Airborne Engineers.

Several hundred yards short of the Ridge the attacking troops came under small arms fire from the enemy who were occupying this higher ground, but the attack continued driving the enemy to the west. Upon reaching the top of the Ridge, heavy small arms and mortar fire was received, and so the troops were ordered to dig in and hold their ground until Major Krause's force from the 3d Battalion arrived.

At approximately 1000 hours the 200 men from the 3d Battalion moved into the olive grove behind Biazzo Ridge. Their machine gun platoon and 81-mm mortars were put in position and, shortly after that, they jumped off in an attack through the troops who held the Ridge. The enemy, supported by mortar fire, and taking advantage of the trees, vineyards, and other natural cover and concealment offered by the Sicilian countryside at this time of year, retaliated with intense fire, and very stubbornly withdrew, step by step. (54)

Late in the morning the enemy launched their counterattack, which consisted of infantry supported by six Mark VI tanks. Their tanks overran the assault elements of the airborne force and advanced to the base of Biazzo Ridge, less than 75 yards from the Combat Team Command Post on the reverse slope, but the fire of the troopers forced the enemy infantry to stay outside the battle position. As a result of this counterattack, with its supporting fires, many casualties were inflicted on the troopers, but their lines held against the enemy's infantry throughout the whole battle. Because much equipment had been lost on the jump there were no anti-tank weapons available. The German "Tiger" tanks, with their heavy desert treads, soon realized this, and they defiantly sat there in the knee-high deep vineyard just short of the Ridge and sprayed their machine guns and fired their "88's" at anything that moved. When they ran low on ammunition they turned and went back for a new supply, only to return confident that the lightly armed airborne troops still had nothing that would penetrate their heavy armor plate.

(54) A-9, p.10, 11; A-16, p.25, 26.

Two 75-mm pack howitzers, which were in position behind the Ridge firing some much needed supporting fire, were finally employed as anti-tank guns. Lt Loren and Sgt Thomas moved a gun to the top of the ridge, and, despite all types of small arm fire being directed at them, and the concussion of 88-mm gun-fire twice knocking them down, they engaged a tank at point blank range and knocked it out. This was too much for the other tanks and they withdrew.

The Combat Team commander had sent for a heavy artillery liaison party, a Navy liaison party, and a company of tanks as soon as he found that the enemy had such strength. About 1530 the liaison parties arrived and soon after were directing Navy gunfire and 155-mm howitzer fire in front of Biazzo Ridge and on suspected enemy assembly areas. This quieted the enemy down, and some of the men who had been pinned to the ground for nearly six hours were able to partially relax.

With the arrival of eleven Sherman tanks and additional men, including Lt Swinger's group from the Headquarters and Command serial, Colonel Gavin announced that there would be an attack at 2030 hours. The plan was to have every available man, supported by the Sherman tanks, the heavy artillery, and the naval gunfire, jump off in a frontal attack. Its purpose was to destroy all enemy to the immediate front, evacuate our dead and wounded who were in the areas of the battle position which had been penetrated, and finally to set up a complete defense of Biazzo Ridge.

As planned, the attack jumped off with the present positions being the line of departure. The troops consisted of men from the Combat Team, the 45th Infantry Division, and even some sailors who had come ashore for a fight. Every man was firing some sort of weapon and advancing straight at the enemy's lines. The enemy

put down a terrific mortar barrage on the Combat Team's position during the initial part of the attack, however, their position was completely overrun and they lost heavily in men killed and captured. The enemy troops that could, withdrew to the north. (See Map E)

Much equipment was captured including the 6-inch Russian mortars the enemy had used during the final attack.

Our gains were consolidated, the wounded evacuated, and a defense set up for the night. (55)

The battle for Biazzo Ridge on D-plus-1 was the largest scale encounter with the enemy that the 505th Combat Team had in Sicily, but as a result of this the last main avenue of approach to the invasion beaches was cut off from enemy use.

At the close of the period covered by this monograph (9-11 July 1943), we find that the missions assigned to the 505th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team had all been accomplished, and in addition enemy forces had been stopped from reaching the invasion beaches.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making a study of this operation we must consider, first of all, the fact that it cannot be compared with accepted military doctrine. It was the first time in military history that a unit of this size had been dropped by parachute on enemy territory. It was also the first night combat jump in military history conducted by a unit this size.

The procedures developed and followed by this unit were experimental, and as such cannot be criticised, but rather analyzed, and the weaknesses that were discovered pointed out.

(55) Eye witness account.



With this in mind, let us analyze the operation.

I believe the mission that was assigned to the 505th Parachute Regimental Combat Team was an excellent one for airborne troops.

The preparation for this mission, conducted by the Combat Team commander, in my opinion, was superior. With no previous battle experiences to benefit from, this team of over 3400 officers and men was instilled with the highest morale, esprit de corps, and fighting team spirit that is possible. This spirit was based primarily on the fact that extensive training had given the men confidence in themselves, their weapons and equipment, their leaders, and their ability to maneuver and fight as a team.

This preparation was extremely thorough. Each man had studied the objective area from maps, photographs, and sand tables, as well as running problems on a life size mock-up of the area. He had studied the enemy's country, weapons, and probable plan of maneuver against the Combat Team. He knew exactly what his job would be and also the Air Force plan for flying him to the drop area. As a result of extensive research and development conducted on the equipment of the Combat Team, and how it should be dropped, each man knew exactly what he would carry and where he would carry it. It is interesting to note that the standardized parachutist's combat load, developed by this Regimental Board, was used in all other airborne operations in World War II, with few minor changes being made. This combat load and dress was demonstrated to other invasion troops. The thoroughness in preparation went so far as to include an aerial reconnaissance through enemy anti-aircraft fire by the

Combat Team commander and some of his subordinates. This was made one month to the day prior to the invasion, so the objective could be seen in the same amount of moonlight as there would be on the night of the actual drop.

The security of this operation was complete. This was demonstrated by the surprise and confusion of the enemy when the shock action of the airborne troops took effect.

It is well known that the Air Force must drop the troops on their objective area in order for the men to work as a complete team, but they failed to do this in this operation. The effect of the weather, plus the lack of navigational aids, night formation flying, and flying through anti-aircraft fire, caused a wide dispersal of troops on the ground. Much credit must be given, however, to the Air Force crews who, despite many handicaps, found their way to Sicily and dropped their parachutists on the enemy.

As for the operations of the Combat Team elements once they were on the ground, we find that not only was the assigned mission accomplished, but men, who could not get to the objective area, destroyed the enemy where they could find him. This resulted in assisting the beach landings of all Allied invasion forces.

A great deal of credit is due the officers and men of the Combat Team for their aggressive spirit in organizing fighting forces, disrupting communications, and destroying the enemy.

Small groups resorted to ambush, trickery, and other guerilla tactics in defeating larger enemy forces. Units, who were able to assemble, put their training to good use by conducting organized tactical maneuvers in destroying enemy resistance.

Dispersal of troops meant dispersal of ammunition, weapons and other equipment which was needed in the fight. Had the force at Biazzo Ridge had some effective anti-tank protection, they wouldn't have lost the men they did.

In summing up this operation we find that, despite faulty delivery of troops, the mission was accomplished, and the "proving ground" for large scale airborne operations had made airborne employment a part of accepted military doctrine.

Who is in a better position to judge the success of this airborne operation than the enemy?

The following is a statement of General Karl Student, German commander of the airborne forces that captured Crete, and Commander-in-Chief of all German airborne troops from 1943 until his capture at the end of the war in Europe:

"The Allied airborne operation in Sicily was decisive despite widely scattered drops, which must be expected in a night landing. It is my opinion that if it had not been for the Allied airborne forces blocking the Herman Goering Armored Division from reaching the beachhead, that division would have driven the initial seaborne forces back into the sea. I attribute the entire success of the Allied Sicilian operation to the delaying of German reserves until sufficient forces had been landed by sea to resist the counterattack by our defending forces."

### LESSONS

Some of the lessons learned by this operation are:

1. The dropping of airborne troops to protect invasion seaborne landings is an excellent airborne mission.
2. Airborne troops must receive complete, individual, tactical training, as drop dispersion may require independent guerilla warfare.

3. Airborne troops should study maps and photographs of the drop zone and surrounding area, in order to orient themselves upon landing and facilitate assembly.

4. Airborne troops, because they may not recover bundle-dropped weapons, should know how to operate the enemy's principal weapons.

5. Prior to an airborne mission, showdown inspections should insure that each man has his complete equipment.

6. If the uniform of airborne troops differs from that of seaborne forces, demonstration teams should show the seaborne forces the difference, to prevent lack of identification upon ground link-up.

7. Security concerning the employment of airborne forces is essential.

8. Surprise and shock action is essential in an airborne operation.

9. The Air Force's ability to drop airborne troops in the correct area is essential to the completion of the mission by an organized team.

10. Air Force units must be highly trained in night formation flying and non-evasive action when receiving anti-aircraft fire.

11. The weather is an important factor in the successful dropping of airborne forces.

12. Additional navigational aids are needed to assist the Air Force in dropping airborne troops on their planned drop zones. This could best be done by dropping pathfinder teams, with a homing device, on the correct drop zone prior to the arrival of the main body.

13. The movement of troops in many directions after dropping on a strange drop zone, rather than assembling, demonstrated a need for ground assembly devices.

14. The amount of moonlight available on the night of a combat parachute drop should be considered in the operation planning.

15. Every officer and non-commissioned officer of an airborne unit must be trained to assume command responsibility without hesitation, as leaders may not be readily available to their unit because of drop dispersion.

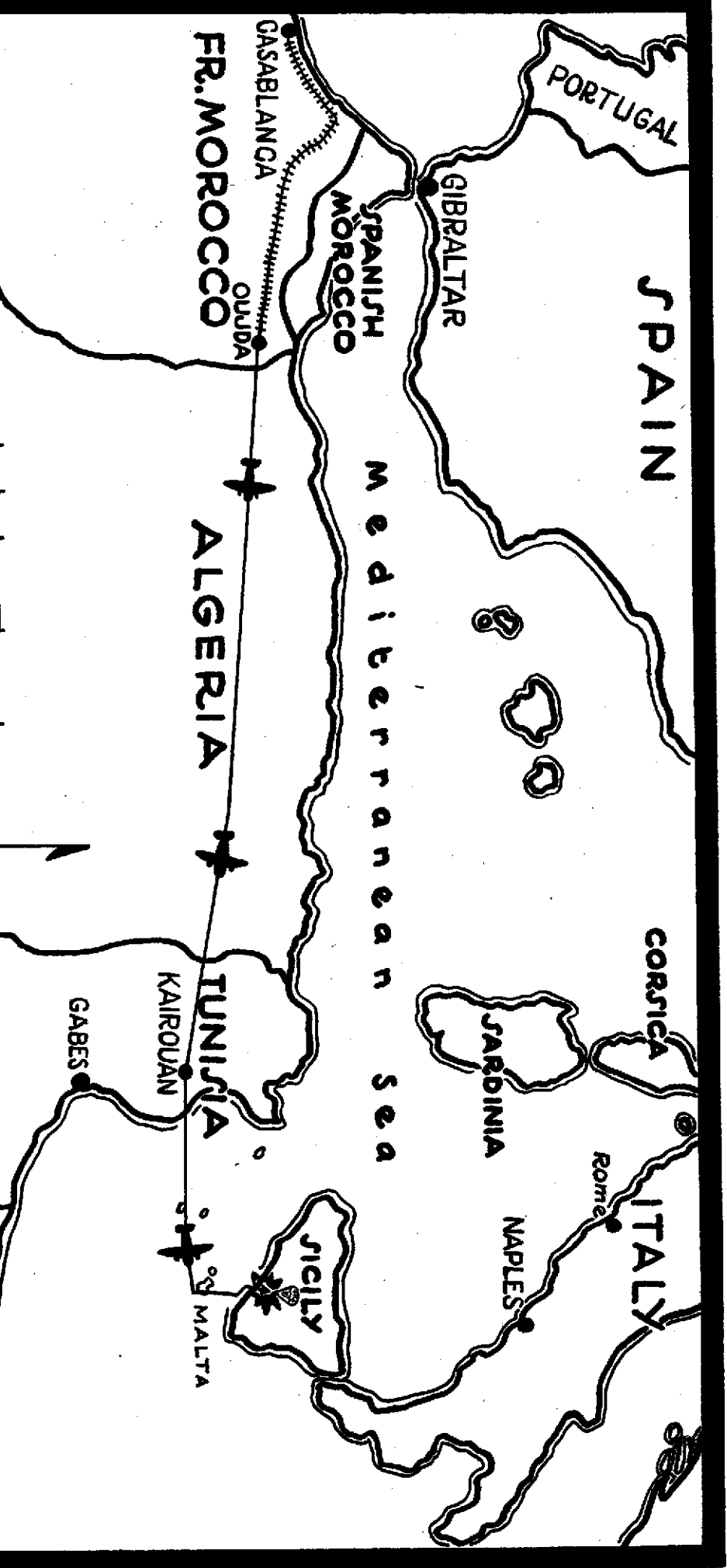
16. Effective anti-tank weapons, capable of being parachuted, should be available to airborne troops.

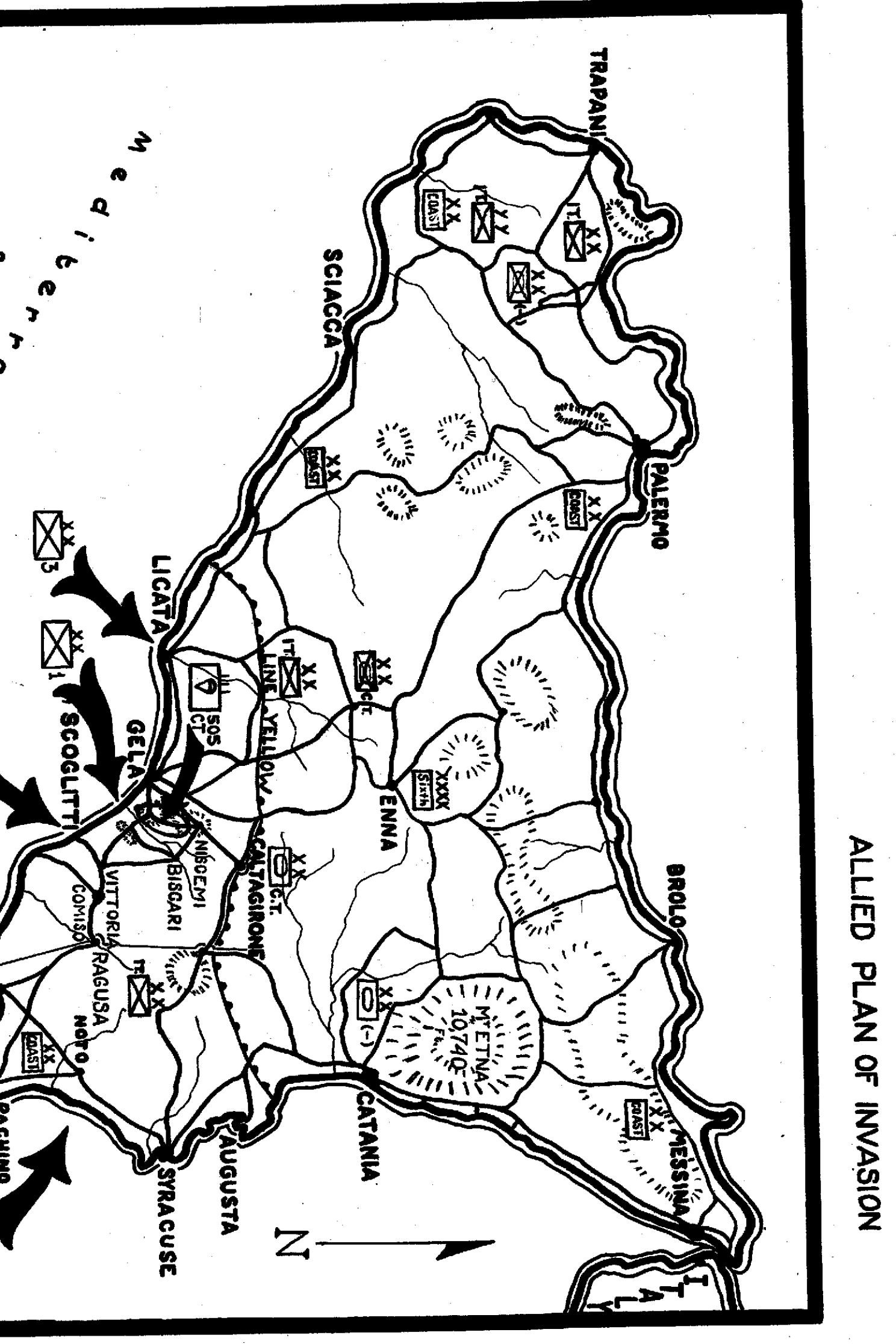
17. Airborne troops are not capable of sustained action against an organized enemy unless they are reinforced by armor and artillery.

18. An airborne operation will be successful if the personnel, knowing their task, disregard any handicaps and strive to accomplish the mission.

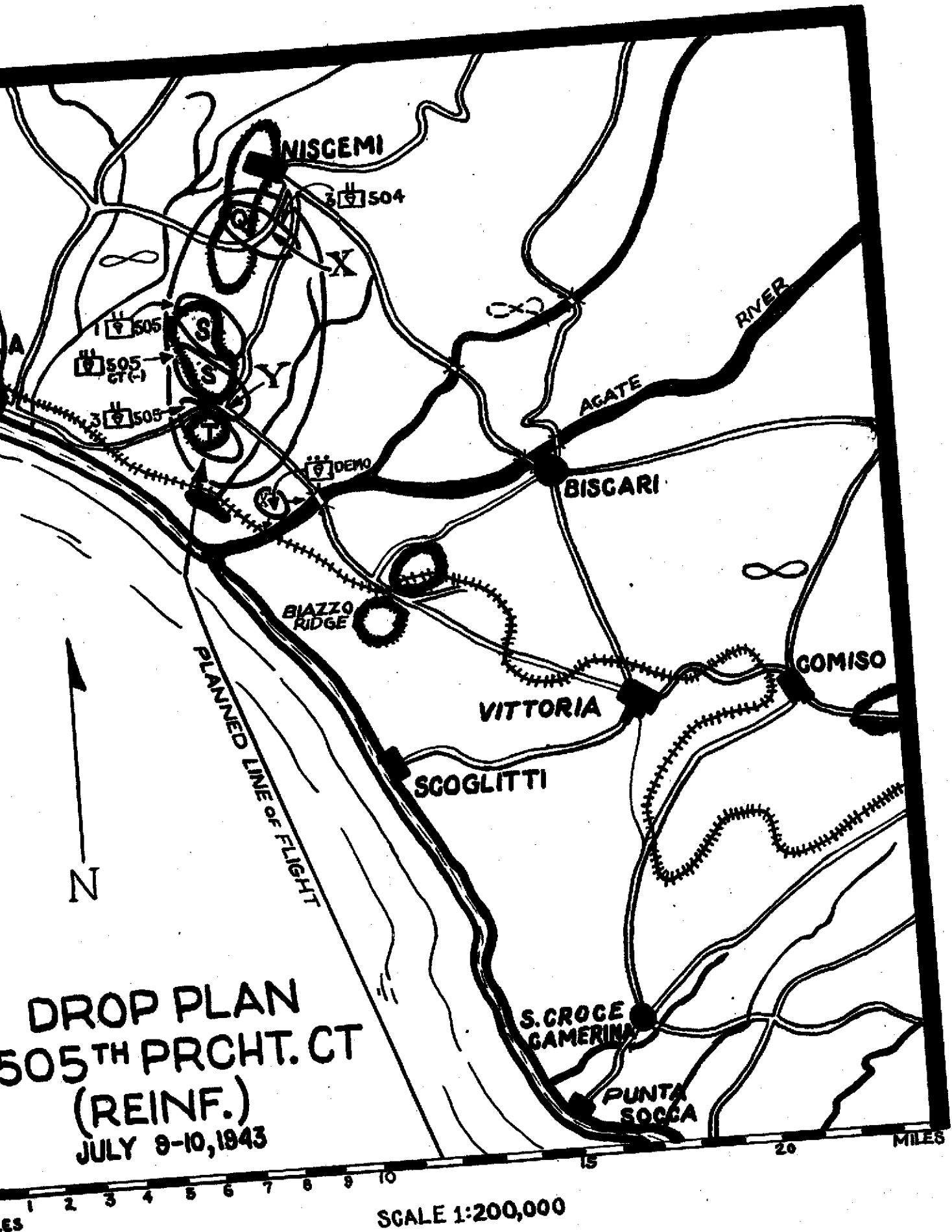
# MAP "A"

CASABLANCA TO SICILY



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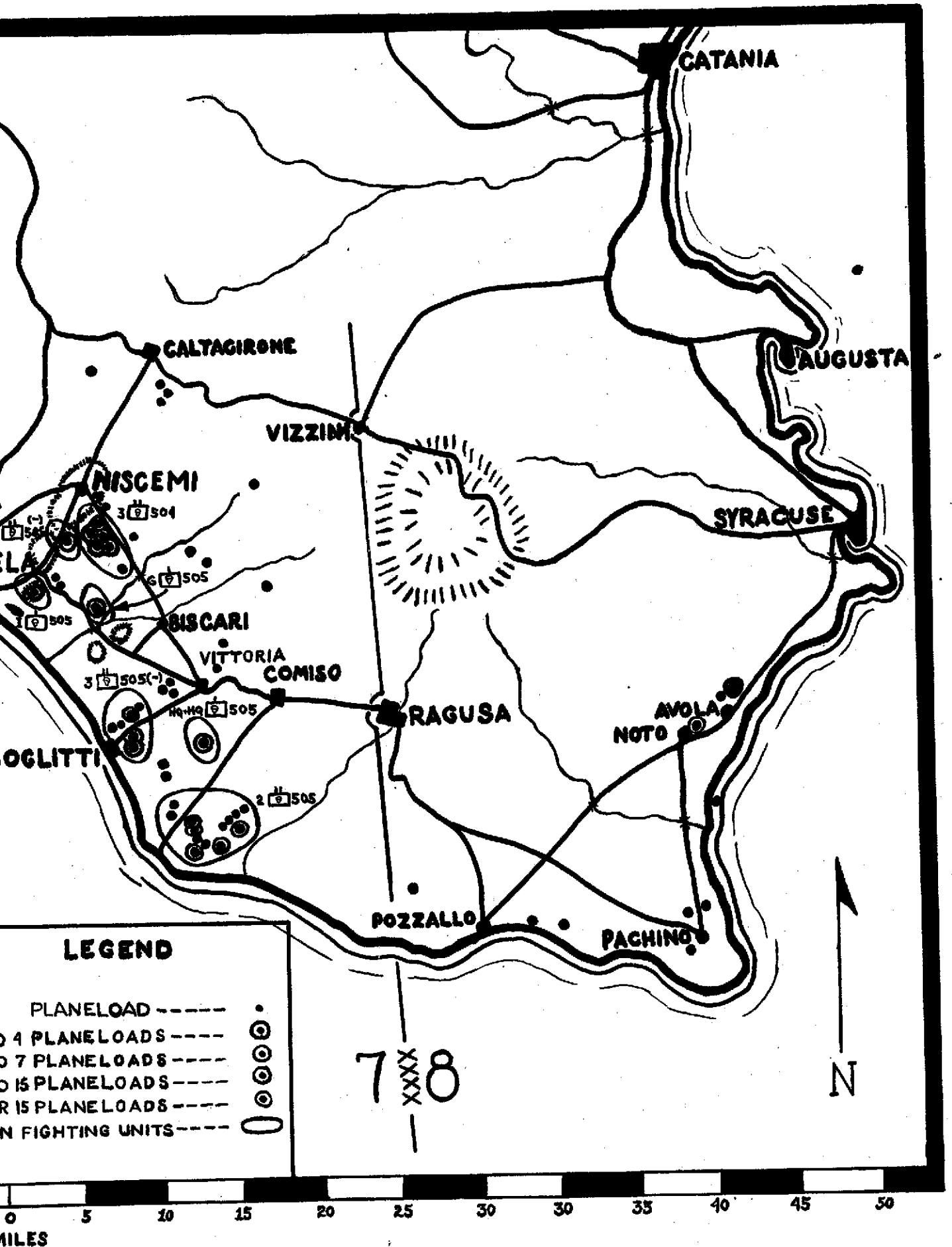
# MAP "C"





# MAP "D"

ACTUAL DROP AREAS 505 PI. C.T.



# MAP "E"

GROUND ACTION OF 505 P.I. C.T.

